RA Delegates to Vote on Dues

Delegates to the 2016 Vermont-NEA Representative Assembly will vote on a modest dues increase of less than 70 cents a month when they gather at the Killington Grand Hotel on April 8 and 9.

The dues increase is different depending on the category of membership. For full-time teachers, the annual increase in dues comes to $8. For part-time teachers, it is $4, as it is for full-time ESP members. “The modest increase in dues comes about because more and more non-members are now paying their fair share,” Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen said. “Without fair share fees, we would be looking at much larger dues increases.”

In addition to voting on dues, delegates will also vote on bylaws changes proposed by the Vermont-NEA Board of Directors. One such change would make promoting the safety of students and school employees a part of our statement of purpose. Another change would allow the president to delegate the evaluation of the executive director to others. Still another change would allow for instant-runoff elections of officers and board directors, mitigating the need to hold costly run-off elections. A final change would formally establish continued on p. 6

Lawmakers Listened to You: No More Caps

In a remarkable post-midnight session, lawmakers on Saturday, Jan. 30 voted to strip Act 46 of its most dangerous provision: the allowable growth percentage thresholds that were forcing districts to shortchange our children to fit their spending to arbitrarily imposed “caps” from Montpelier.

And the only reason they eased the so-called caps for the upcoming school year and removed them entirely for the 2017-2018 year is because they heard from you.

More than 500 of you contacted lawmakers, telling them to scrap the caps. “When it comes to telling lawmakers what these caps really mean to Vermont’s children, you and your fellow members are the best messengers,” said Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen. “I am extremely grateful that your advocacy made all the difference.”

The thresholds, affecting all school districts, were to have been in place for FY ‘17 and ‘18.

The tax penalty never took into account that, in most places, school costs, including those for employee health, simply could not be responsible to children without exceeding the caps.

Going into the State House in January, we knew we needed a legislative fix: if the House and Senate could not agree on what to do, we’d be stuck with the caps for two full years.

We also knew the issues were so complex and contentious there was no reasonable way to expect action quickly enough to protect school budgets for next year (FY ’17), so we went to work immediately to get rid of the “caps” altogether for FY ’18 and minimize their impact for FY ’17.

The Vermont Senate stood with you and your fellow educators from the beginning.

Last May, most of its members voted for the “governance” change portions of Act 46 while holding their collective nose at the caps provision. By a 28-1 vote last month, it went on almost unanimous record seeking its repeal for both years (FY ’17 and ’18).

The House, on the other hand, with many individual exceptions, was actually enthusiastic about capping school spending last May.

In the end, the caps aren’t primarily about school boards, business managers and lawmakers: they are about real losses to real children. Science, Math, Technology, Arts, Music, Band, Cross country, Soccer, Guidance counselors, Field trips, Even crossing guards.

We testified to the Senate about the harm to our children that would result from the caps. Its members listened and did what they could.

We testified to a less favorable reception in the House.

So, we turned our – and your – attention to House legislative leaders, with the constant messages that spending limits are dangerous public policy, that they must be eliminated for FY ’18, and their impact had to be minimized in FY ’17.

The result: The caps are repealed for FY ’18; in FY ’17, the caps do not apply at all to school districts with below average per-pupil spending; and in FY ’17, the tax penalty for spending beyond the caps will be substantially reduced: the spending threshold before the cap is reached is increased by almost 1% and the tax penalty is reduced from $1 to 25¢ for every dollar spent above the cap.

While the victory on Jan. 30 was great, the damage wrought by the Act 46 “caps” is impossible to completely reverse this year. Because the caps were in place until now and school budgets for next year (FY ’17) have been all but finalized, many school programs will be degraded and many school employees will see their positions disappear.

Given the timing, the mood in the House, and the importance this has for you and the students you serve, we know we got the best we could.

One thing we do know: Together, we can accomplish great things on behalf of Vermont’s children.

We will pledge to oppose caps everywhere and anywhere they are proposed, because in the end, they shortchange our students.

“In the end, the caps aren’t primarily about school boards, business managers and lawmakers: they are about real losses to real children,” Allen said.

“Science, Math, Technology, Arts, Music, Band, Cross country, Soccer, Guidance counselors, Field trips, Even crossing guards. We have always been, and will always be opposed to dangerous spending caps, because the only thing they accomplish is to reduce educational opportunities for our children.”
We are at a point in time where our influence as educators can make a huge difference to our students. As we all know, many of us went into education so that we might make a difference to our students. Now it is our chance to make a collective difference with our students, schools, communities, and society in general.

I feel that we are at a tipping point in our society. Over the past couple of years, many injustices have been brought to the forefront of conversations and in the media across the country. For too long these injustices have persisted in communities of color across the nation; unfortunately, they continue. It is up to us to lead and work to put an end to institutional racism.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I am well aware that this is a monumental task. It will involve years of work to undo the ingrained racism that has been promoted and supported throughout our legal system, political system, and yes, our educational system. Many of us don’t even recognize some of the subtle, yet discriminatory, laws and cultural norms that are so much a part of the fabric of our society.

As educators, we must take this challenge on by first educating ourselves. It is vital that Vermont-NEA members become aware of the discriminatory behaviors and biases that exist in every corner of our state and country. We all need to find where each of us is on the learning curve and work together to learn, and then share those lessons with our students.

I look at this as a three-step initiative. First, we must become aware of what institutional racism looks like in Vermont. Second, we must educate ourselves and our students so that our population is well informed. Finally, we must take action to eradicate institutional racism.

Every NEA state affiliate in the country will be taking this on, just imagine, if every NEA member takes some responsibility, virtually every student in the nation’s public schools will learn from their teachers and ESPs. We can be responsible for freeing the next generation from the inequities, injustices, and racially discriminatory behaviors of our society.

Here in Vermont, we need to start somewhere, and our 2016 Representative Assembly is the first step. The invited guests include Chittenden County State’s Attorney TJ Donovan, speaking on restorative justice, and an expert from NEA who will fill us in on the possibilities and challenges we have ahead of us.

As a part of our awareness campaign, every delegate to this year’s RA will receive free copies of two books; Michelle Alexander’s, “The New Jim Crow,” and, “Between the World and Me,” by Ta-Nehisi Coates. I found both of these books stimulating and informative. They will serve as a background for discussions as we move forward.

I am excited about this new challenge. We can all learn a tremendous amount from these books, our speakers, and discussions in our schools and communities. I look forward to Vermont-NEA’s partnering with groups around our state as we challenge and beat back the ugly realities of racism. We really can make a difference in our society if we embrace this initiative, together.

Sisters and Brothers, join me at this critical time.

Let us work together and provide opportunities for our students to view our society through a different lens; one that embraces the differences in people, and at the same time identifies the many, many similarities we have regardless of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, educational background, political preference, or zip code.

If you are interested in serving on a Vermont-NEA task force to move this initiative forward, please contact me, mallen@vtnea.org.
5 Tips for Effective Online Parent Communication

Learn how to use email, mobile apps and other online communication tools strategically so you can get the most out of parent portals.

Kelley Combs, an elementary special education teacher in Fox Lake, Illinois, used to give out her cellphone number to parents. Not anymore. “That was not my best plan,” Combs says. “I would have parents send me messages over the weekend and expect replies. I would get a text at 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning asking about something.”

Now, Combs uses online tools to communicate with parents. “These tools—including email, mobile apps and the parent portals of learning management systems—allow educators to keep lines of communication open without the risk of late-night phone calls. But these tools can become overwhelming, too, and can create confusion with parents, unless they’re used strategically.

Follow these tips to get the most out of online parent communication.

1. Set Limits
If you’re not careful, email can take up more time than phone calls. A message here and there to clarify a rule or set up a meeting is one thing. A constant back-and-forth to hash out everything from assignment grades to social skills is another.

“Last year there were a couple of days when I was at my wit’s end, where I spent two and a half hours emailing parents,” says Stefanie Curry, a second-grade teacher in Chicago. “That’s when I went to my principal and said, ‘This is too much.’ It was taking away from planning time, preparing time and student time, to be honest.”

The problem, Curry says, is that she made herself too accessible. Her new rule is that she’ll hold off on answering emails until the end of the day. But really, there’s no harm in a 24-hour (or even 48-hour) reply policy for non-urgent messages. It will slow the back-and-forth, and can also help cool off emotional exchanges.

2. Clarify Upfront
If your school uses an online learning management system, the parent portal can give parents constant insight into their children’s grades. But if parents don’t understand those grades (and especially if the grades seem low), this access can lead to confusion, or even anger.

Julie Lyman, an elementary reading specialist in Chicago, says that teachers at her school follow district policy and give students a “C” for work that meets grade-level standards—a grade that is seen as tantamount to failing by many parents, until they learn the school’s policies.

“I advise teachers to be very clear as to what the grades are based on, when they do an open house or during conferences, to be clear on what the grades are communicating,” Lyman says.

3. Stay Positive
Barbara Martinez, a kindergarten teacher in Orlando, Florida, uses the ClassDojo app to track student behavior and share the data with parents in real time. “The students want to earn compliments, and they’re excited that their parents get to see them,” she says. “I’m constantly watching kids to see when I can give them a compliment, and parents are hearing more good things than negative.”

The parents are happy to get little notifications about their children sharing and listening, but their attitudes might change if they were instead seeing a constant stream of notifications about their children talking out of turn and pushing each other. So, Martinez saves most negative behaviors for phone calls, when she can have a more personal conversation.

4. Try Pictures
You’re too busy teaching to curate a glossy classroom Instagram feed. But there are times when sharing a simple photo really can communicate more than a wordy email.

Allison Hogan, a first-grade teacher in Dallas, Texas, uses an app called PhotoCircle to share real-time images from her classroom. It helps parents quickly grasp what their children really do at school, without requiring them to read a lengthy description.

“Parents love it, because it opens the classroom up,” Hogan says. “One parent said, ‘I am now a fly on the wall of my child’s classroom.’”

Hogan also uses the app on field trips to let parents know their kids are safe. On a particularly rainy visit to the zoo, for example, Hogan sent parents a picture of her students huddled in a shelter, warm and dry. “I’m able to ease any apprehension and give reassurance,” she says.

5. Give Options
If possible, try to give parents more than one way to connect with you online. Some parents may never log into a learning management system, but constantly use mobile apps on their phones. Others may not have a smartphone, but check their email every day.

Hogan asks parents during conference time which communication methods they prefer. “You have to know your audience,” she says. “If they’re more on email, I’m happy to send an email. But I have to be able to reach the people I need to reach.”

Keep Connected
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RA 2016 Cheat Sheet

Below we present some of the key information about the votes delegates will take at the 2016 Vermont-NEA Representative Assembly on April 9 at the Killington Grand Hotel. For more details, please see vtnea.org/ra2016

Dues Increases

As a result of full implementation of Vermont’s fair share fee law, the Board of Directors is able to keep dues increases for the coming year low. In fact, the increases represent less than 75 cents a month for full-time teachers. Here are the proposed dues increases by category:

- Full time teacher $8
- Half-time teacher $4
- Quarter-time teacher $2
- >1700 hour ESP $4
- 900-1700 hour ESP $4
- <900 hour ESP $2

Board recommended bylaws changes

A. Proposed amendment to Article I, Section 1, adding reference to school safety to Association statement of purpose.

B. Proposed amendment to Article V, Section 4.a.xxi, permitting the President to delegate direct responsibility for evaluating the Executive Director, rather than requiring the President to be the “primary agent” in that process.

C. Proposed amendment to Article VII providing for preferential voting for Officers and Area Directors.

D. Proposed amendment to Article XI, Section 1.b.iv, providing a specific name to the standing “government/legislative” committee and deleting what become unnecessary references to a legislative contact network, since the language cycles back to the committee anyway.

Due Process

“Due process policies such as tenure are an important; job protection that teachers value highly. These policies don’t prevent bad teachers from being fired; they prevent good teachers from being fired for bad reasons. Qualified teachers earn these due process protections after satisfying performance expectations. These protections allow teachers to advocate for their students and to teach controversial and challenging curriculum without fear that they will be punished for doing so by overreaching administrators and others with arbitrary or personal agendas.

“Striking down the statutes will not help our most at-risk students. High-poverty districts do not suffer from too few teachers being removed; they suffer from too much teacher turnover. Attracting and retaining effective teachers to these schools must be the highest priority, but the trial court’s decision will only make that much harder. It puts unnecessary blame and pressure on teachers who are doing their best to teach at-risk students. An already professionally risky and tough job will only get riskier and tougher. Given the serious teacher shortages California faces, the trial court’s ruling, if allowed to stand, would do serious damage to our public schools, especially our most vulnerable students.

“NEA looks forward to the California Court of Appeal overturning this deeply-flawed decision so that we can return to working on real solutions with education policymakers. Only when teachers, school boards, and administrators work together can we ensure that there is a great public school for every student.”

Leadership Conference 2016: Organize. Unify. Lead

Vermont-NEA’s Leadership Conference has grown into a must-attend event for emerging, established and curious leaders. The three-day event – held Aug. 2-4 on the campus of Champlain College in Burlington – brings together leaders from around the state and around the country. You’ll leave ready to fire up your local in the cause of a stronger union, stronger schools and stronger profession. “Watching new, seasoned and emerging leaders get together every year makes me confident that our union will stay strong, powerful and important,” said Martha Allen, Vermont-NEA President.

The agenda is still being developed, but the conference always brings together fascinating speakers, inspirational leaders and multiple opportunities to demonstrate leadership. To learn more and register (it’s free for members) head on over to vtnea.org/leadership2016.
Senate President Pro Tem John Campbell called education “the front line of defense for our children” when he met with members on the first of two Vermont-NEA Lobby Days last month.

“I have great respect for what you do on behalf of our state’s children,” the father and brother of teachers said. “Education has to be our top priority.”

On two days a week apart, two dozen teachers and Parsons worked the Statehouse, buttonholing lawmakers, testifying in committees and observing the action in both the House and Senate. “We can be in the building every day, and talk to tons of people, and it doesn’t have the same effect as it does when members are here,” said Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen. “Being able to hear from those of you in the classroom gives everyone a reality check.”

House Education Committee Chairman David Sharpe agrees. He said that the testimony from actual educators carries much more weight with him and his committee.

Patty Pomerleau, a math teacher at Weathersfield School in Ascutney and a member of the Vermont-NEA Board of Directors, comes from a family of educators. She talked to lawmakers about how much more difficult the job of teaching has become, augmented by the vitriol against teachers prevalent among elected officials and reported by the press. She told Sharpe and his colleagues that at a recent family gathering — composed largely of current and former educators — she was asked why she ever went into teaching.

In a word; for the kids. And even that aspect of the job has gotten harder, as the effects of drug addiction and poverty make their way into the classroom. As she told ABC 22/FOX 44,

“They come from broken homes, they’re malnourished, but they come in with a smile every day ready to learn,” Pomerleau said. “We’ve had kids who’ve said, ‘Is my mom got arrested last night for drug use, but here’s my homework.”’

But the stress can burn out even the most dedicated educator. Of the 30 people she graduated with, only 10 are still in the classroom. “What keeps me in this is the kids. Those students walk in the door every day with a smile. I will not let them down.”

Members also had a chance to chat with House Speaker Shap Smith; Rep. Kesha Rahm and Sen. David Zuckerman, both candidates for lieutenant governor; and others.

“I’m really proud of our members for taking an entire day to lobby their senators and representatives,” said Colin Robinson, Vermont-NEA’s political organizer who reinstated lobby days three years ago. “Too often in the Statehouse, decisions are made based on spreadsheets and dollars. Our members remind lawmakers that behind every dollar are real children with real needs.”
The search is over.
The NEA Academy is committed to the lifetime learning needs of NEA members.

Educators can take advantage of NEA member-only discounted pricing:
• Professional development courses
• Continuing education courses
• Degrees — Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D's
• NEA member-only scholarships

Degree programs are available in partnership with highly-accredited universities such as:
• Northcentral University
• Robert Morris University
• Southeast Missouri University
• Western Governor's University

For more information, visit us at neaacademy.org
This year you will elect a vice president and several board directors. Voting will begin April 11 and close April 25. You will receive an email invitation to vote. Below are brief verbatim statements from the candidates. For recommendation letters, please visit www.vtnea.org/RAelection16

Alison Sylvester
Vice President
During these past three years I have had the honor of serving as your Vice President. I want to thank all of you for the support and hard work you do in our schools everyday. I have enjoyed meeting so many of you at District Meetings, your local meetings, and at the Vermont-NEA Representative Assembly. Vermont is very lucky to have such talented and dedicated teachers and educational support professionals. I want to encourage each and every member to take the 5 minutes to vote in April. Look in your email inbox for your ballot.

Holly Esterline
Addison-Rutland Area 1
Hello, my name is Holly Esterline, and I am running for the Board of Directors position representing Addison/Rutland Area 1. I have been in education for 18 years, first as a Teacher of the Deaf in Texas and Vermont, and now as the librarian at both Monkton Central School in Monkton and Smiley Memorial School in Bolton. I have seen the importance of the knowledge and strength provided by our union, and I would welcome the opportunity to continue to work as a member of the board, representing not only Vermont educators, but, more importantly, the children we serve.

Steve Orzech
Addison-Rutland Area 1
I would like to take this opportunity to ask for your support in this election. I take my commitments as serious promises to do that job to the best of my abilities. With this in mind, I have decided it will be my last year on the VTNEA finance committee to make room to fulfill this office. I think we also need leaders who understand how important it is to fight for our hard won rights. I assure you that I will represent you with the passion and dedication of our forerunners in this organization. Although I don’t rely on endorsements to win elections, I think it is significant that Rose Wenzel, your current representative, approached me to succeed her in this position.

Aimee Hawkins
Northwestern Area 1
(no statement provided)

Keren Turner
Chittenden Area 1
I'm Keren Turner. I teach Spanish at Colchester High School. I started serving on the VTNEA Board in August 2015. It has been an education. The suspicions I had about huge amounts of work being done by VTNEA to benefit and support Vermont’s students, teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff and retirees turned out to be true. I'd like to work to help publicize what you as a member are really getting for your union dues. I am not an officer of my local, only a member, so I bring a different view of how things look to the Board.

Gail Ducharme
Central Vermont, Area 2
My name is Gail Ducharme. I am a candidate for the VTNEA Board of Directors for Central Vermont Area 2. I am the substitute coordinator and a high school para educator at Twintfield Union School. At my local association, I am the treasurer and on the negotiations team. I am a member of our regional bargaining council and a member of our PEAC team. I applied for training with NEA’s Leaders for Tomorrow Program. I was one of sixteen selected nationally for this program and will be graduating in March 2016. I hope to serve this area as your board director. Thank you for considering me for this position.

List of Candidates for Delegates to NEA RA

- Mary Bowers, Barre Town EA
- Erin Carter, Barre EA
- Ashley Dunlea, Barre EA
- Darcey Fletcher, Lamoille Union EA
- Chris Guros, Montpelier EA
- Aimee Hawkins, Franklin Northwest NEA
- Linda Howard, Twintfield EA
- Denette Locke, Fletcher EA
- Steve Owens, Washington Central EA
- Alison Sylvester, Springfield TA
- Christie Therault, Windham Southeast EA
- Pat Thompson, Bellows Free Academy EA
- Terri Vest, Twinfield EA
- Eric Weiss, U-32 SA
- Linda Deliduka, Retired Member
NEA Fights to Overturn Anti-Due Process Court Case

LOS ANGELES - The California Court of Appeal in Los Angeles on Feb. 25 was asked to reverse the troubling decision by the California Superior Court in Vergara v. State of California that wrongly struck down due process protections for teachers under California law. The National Education Association joins the State of California, the California Teachers Association and California Federation of Teachers in urging reversal of the deeply-flawed decision.

The trial court’s decision contains serious legal errors that could lead to an explosion of litigation, threatening to constitutionalize every education policy decision school districts and the state must make.

Preeminent education policy experts, school board members and administrators, civil rights advocates, award-winning teachers, and top legal scholars have filed amici curiae, or “friend of the court” briefs urging the California Court of Appeal to uphold the basic protections on which teachers and students depend. NEA also filed an amicus brief, urging the court to restore to the California Legislature the prerogative to make educational policy by striking down the Vergara ruling.

The following statement can be attributed to NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia:

“The Vergara v. State of California lawsuit is an example of using our court system for political goals. Ensuring that every student gets a good education is a critical goal but one that can’t be solved with lawsuits. From the onset, the case has highlighted the wrong problems, proposed the wrong solutions, and followed the wrong process. What’s most troubling of all is that this lawsuit is not about helping students and has become a divisive distraction from the real work needed to improve student success.

“The trial court was wrong on the facts and the law. Trial testimony established that the education statutes at issue help districts attract and retain high-quality teachers and ensure that good teachers are not fired for bad reasons. Both sides agree that there are only a small number of grossly ineffective teachers, and trial evidence demonstrates that the statutes do not prevent school districts from dismissing such teachers.”

continued on p. 4

Your 2016 RA is April 8-9 in Killington

This edition of Vermont-NEA Today is full of information to get you ready for the association’s most important meeting. We have a cheat sheet on page 4 as well as detailed stories on pages 1, 6 and 7. More details are at www.vtnea.org/ra2016.